

An Early Duxbury Colonial Outreach

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

The casual reader of the heroic record of the Pilgrims of Plymouth, their break away from English traditions and homeland, their 12 years living in a foreign land and their braving the stormy north Atlantic at the worst time of year would assume that common sense would dictate a "staying put" once they arrived on solid terra firma, thankful for a minimum survival, but he would be wrong.

No sooner had they constructed their thatched roofed village than they went exploring the coasts and the backwoods of their new homeland, reaching as far as present day Brockton and Bridgewater and the present Rhode Island border on the south, and much of Cape Cod.

As early as 1629 the Plymouth colony claimed this land area. This border was battled over by the two adjoining states for over a hundred years, Massachusetts declining to appoint a survey panel along with Rhode Island because they were defiant against the royal decree in 1746 that allotted to Rhode Island 5 towns that had belonged to Massachusetts. But this is to jump way ahead in my story which seeks to remind readers of the *Clipper* of a strenuous effort on the part of 29 Duxburyites to open up a fertile final corner of their land to their settlement. The centerpiece of this report has to be the Sekonnet River.



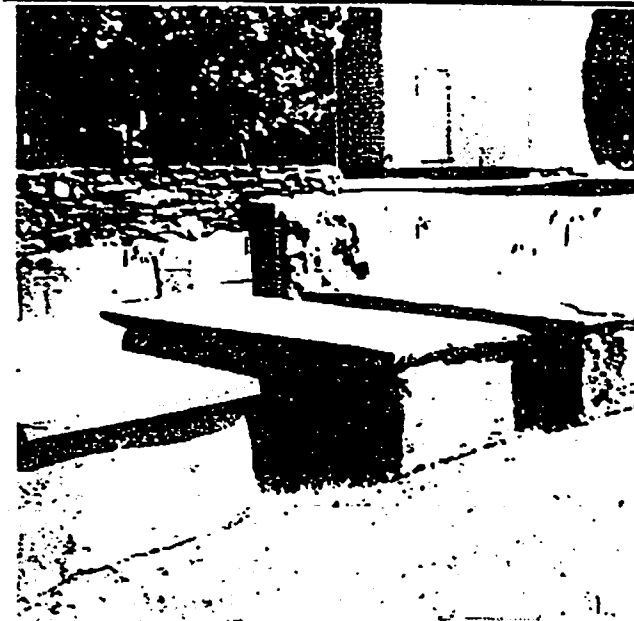
My first acquaintance with this river and the area around it came one early June afternoon when I was part of a crew driving 2 Harvard coach's launches to New London, CT to help prepare for the annual Harvard-Yale boat race, the earliest athletic contest in collegiate America. We were halted by gunfire from a Coast Guard rum-running patrol boat, only to be let go, then an hour later our motors had drowned out in heavy Buzzard Bay seas and the same vessel turned into a rescue ship towing us into the Sekonnet River and a night of safety. The crew vacated their bunks, fed us a bountiful baked bean dinner, putting us up for the night, and after a hearty breakfast set us on our way. I was a freshman at the time and we had brought along another launch driver, Harry Blackmun, who was my Harvard roommate.

Harry went after graduation to Harvard Law school earning his way by his launch driving, then a distinguished career as lawyer in his home city, St. Paul and later as counsel for the Rochester Minnesota clinic, a period as judge in the federal circuit of appeals, and climaxed his career where he sits as a Supreme Court Justice. I went on to teach English at a royal founded school in Honolulu, returning to train for the ministry at the Virginia Seminary, moving into my first parish at Wiscasset, ME, then a college generation as chaplain at Princeton University suffering a turbulent period of post war readjustment in Buffalo, taking a parish in a Pittsburgh suburb and finally becoming Canon to the Bishop and into retirement.

In this way 66 years have passed and much water has flowed out of the Sekonnet River into Block Island sound and I found myself driven not by wind and wave in



Treaty Rock, Little Compton



Sarcophagi of Benjamin Church and family.

a floundering motor launch seeking rescue from the Coast Guard but by a compulsive curiosity to open up secrets of the past in my old home town of Duxbury, triggered by a question from my son after the disaster of the Blizzard of '78. "How did you cope in your day without power plows, telephonic communication, etc?" and supported by an imaginative local newspaper editor, John Cutler. John urged me not to suffocate my memories of the past, but to release them for Duxbury people to begin to appreciate the life style of 75 years or so ago when people had few of the comforts of modern living.

My research was never deep, after all I was not a scholar, but this compulsive curiosity led me into many nooks and crannies of the past hitherto buried in the dustbin of history. A particular trail was opened for me in Tony Kelso's report in the *Duxbury Book* on old Duxbury families where he mentioned William Pabodie, born in England in 1629, arriving in Plymouth and shortly later marrying Elizabeth Alden, the oldest daughter of John and Priscilla; quarreling with the Brewsters on Eagle Nest Point and then moving to Little Compton, RI in 1680. A quick glance at the map showed me how far away this was, but why did the Pabodie's move here? Each event led to more questions and I found myself in a full scale search for reasons and facts and people. How would the Pabodie's get to Little Compton with all their goods and chattels and

children (They would finally end up with a family of 11). This was really bewildering to me so I asked our town historian Katherine Pillsbury about it. "You may not know," she said "that there are several Duxbury people buried in the Little Compton cemetery behind the congregational church there."

This compelled me to dig into records, many of which I found in a book titled *Notes on Little Compton* by a William Wilbour. Here I read that there were 2 meetings of 29 Duxburyites one held on July 31, 1673 and the other on March 29, 1674 in which William Pabodie and Constant Southworth (builder in 1665 of the Crab Island house in Millbrook) presented results of a survey they had made of the Sakonnet River area. The land area was then divided into 32 plots and lots were drawn to give all present a share. Several acres were allotted to the Awashons, the Indian tribe that occupied this land as far as the Buzzard's Bay region. It was a matter of pride that these Duxbury men paid for the land and a treaty was put together with the Queen of the Awashons and several of her Indian braves present led by another Duxburyite named Benjamin Church. The treaty was signed by a large boulder henceforth known as Treaty Rock. Benjamin Church would distinguish himself later in a war of an Indian uprising led by an Indian chief known as King Philip. The war lasted less than a year from 1675-76 and was noteworthy because many friendly Indians flocked to support Church and the colonists, so appreciative were they of the treatment Church had dealt with them. Again and again in his diary he speaks of saluting Indian groups through an interpreter, "No one here is going to hurt you." Perhaps a word about Benjamin Church may be in order here.

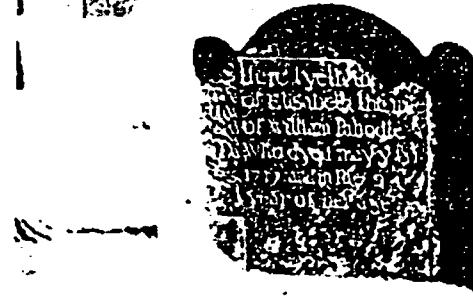
He was probably born around 1639 in Plymouth (records are scarce and unreliable). He came to Duxbury in 1668 purchasing a large section of land along the street that now bears his name, and a plot of land in the northwest section of Duxbury, where Pembroke, Marshfield, and Duxbury borders come together. I checked this out when I wrote stories of Camp Wing and the Josiah Kean homestead. The date here was 1678. The stature of Church was large and his standing in the colony was commensurate. This is proved by the fact that when Little Compton celebrated its tercentenary in 1975 he held the central place as the town's hero. He was way ahead of his time in that he believed the native Americans and the English could achieve an accommodation.

It is often overlooked that there were strenuous efforts made in the early days of the colony to help the Indians accept Christianity and the Englishman's way of life. The Indians were declared a "protected people" and "prayer

villages" were established—14 of them under the leadership of John Eliot. Of course after the warm welcome by many tribes, especially the Wampanoags, under their chief Massasoit maintained peaceful relations for 40 years. Anita Tien, a cultural professor at Wellesley gave a Sarah Wingate Taylor lecture to the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society in which she described the efforts of the colonists to "Christianize" the Indians. She spoke of the efforts of the Virginia Colony whose House of Burgesses appropriated £20,000 to extend the range of the "Prayer Town," but massacres of 1642 and 1644 as well as others wiping out entire settlements caused a reversal and the money was spent to raise a militia to begin a program of extermination. America's record of dealing with the native Americans has not been a happy one what with broken treaties and wholesale massacres like the one of Wounded Knee, and we are now in a period of accepting the Indian for the contribution he can make especially to our environment. I was privy to the new openness to the Indians when a young, recent law school graduate uncovered a federal statute called the Non-Intercourse Act passed by the Continental Congress in 1794 forbidding any land transfer from Indians without federal approval. The reinstatement of this law gave 2/3 of the state of Maine back to the Indians until Congress decided terms of reimbursement. Seneca Indians in New York state are laying claim now to a ribbon of land from Lake Erie south to the Pennsylvania border. Family friends of mine report that the entire city of Salamanca is built on land taken from them without compensation.

Every week a news story appears in the press detailing efforts of our native American brothers and sisters to reaffirm their aboriginal rights to the land. The question of how to solve clashes of culture has not been resolved, and has reached horrendous proportions today in the conflict in former Yugoslavia. The matter comes close to Duxbury since word has come that remnants of a tribe are coming to check out Clarke's Island where it is reported Christianized Indians were quartered for a time to "protect" them from other Indians to whom they appeared to be traitors to their tradition.

My last word about Benjamin Church has to be a report of his expeditions against the French, the fifth and last of which found him and his followers erasing villages on the west coast of Nova Scotia in 1704 in retaliation for the death of his grandson in the Deerfield Massacre. This was the same year he built the congregational church in Little Compton. He later moved to Bristol a town, one of 5 hitherto part of the



Pabodie grave stone. Twenty-six Duxburyites founded the town under Benjamin Church.

Plymouth colony since 1629, but transferred to Rhode Island by royal decree in 1746 when the Sakonnet River became the final border between the 2 states. As reported earlier this border was in dispute for the next century. At some point along the way Rhode Island National guardsmen in target practice injured some Massachusetts farmers' cattle. But rather than go to the Supreme Court the Governor of Massachusetts wrote a letter to the Governor of Rhode Island suggesting that his guardsmen shift to "shooting the long way rather than the short way of the state."

So this brief vignette of Duxbury Colonial history will open up a new vista of American Pilgrim history. The subject is an expanding one as it opens happy highlands of a romantic past when our forbears are seen not as religious fanatics seeking only freedom of worship but explorers and expeditors of a new world. Much of what is contained here can be read in a book entitled *Diary of King Philip's War* on file in the Duxbury Free Library Duxbury Room.

Benjamin Church died in Bristol where he had moved in 1718 but his body remains in the sarcophagus along with those of his family in the little cemetery beside the church in Little Compton.

Justice Blackmun recalled in vivid detail our encounter with wind and wave and the US Coast Guard in our annual exchange of birthday greetings we have continued since college days almost 70 years ago. It has been a joy to dig into this moment in our past and to take it into Duxbury's colonial history. It was Duxbury men, not men from Plymouth, that took the initiative to begin a new venture in colonial living in a new corner of the new world. I have been invited back to Little Compton for a further report on this little known spot of land by the Sakonnet River.